



Is Healthcare Really Recession-proof?

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Many, myself included, have used the expression that “we operate in a recession-proof industry”. In some small way I am sure we have taken comfort from that statement. That regardless of economic factors or strife, people will always get sick and need healthcare. That governments and/or employers will plow money into keeping their citizens/workers healthy. That those “in charge” will see the wisdom of the arguments for investment, whether in facilities, technologies or trained staff. And that, especially in Canada, our elected officials will never allow the very social system that defines our identity, at least with respect to our southern cousins, to falter.

Well, I fear that we may be on a path to find out whether these premises are accurate. The economic meltdown in the US financial markets is profound. I do not believe we fully appreciate the potential impact and the far reaching effects that it could have. Who says we couldn't have another crash? And if we did, the supply of investment capital to sustain our healthcare infrastructure could dissipate quickly.

Anyway, I digress. This article was not intended to be about fear-mongering.

Looking closer to home, I see the looming federal election. While not as exciting and full of colourful characters as in the US, it does provide cause for reflection. Remember the days gone by when the issue of sustainable healthcare was the headline story from all parties? Each party was trying to one-up the other with inventive schemes (and EHR investments) as a way to demonstrate their connection to the concerns of the common Canadian and thereby inspire confidence in the voters? Well, where is healthcare now on the election platform? Nowhere!

Why, I wonder? Is it because the issue is tired, that citizens aren't as concerned anymore? Is it because the politicians realize they can't “fix” healthcare in a term or two. I don't know the exact reason, although I suspect it is rooted in these two points.

Anyway, to the real point of this article. We need to sensitize the parties to the need to keep investments in eHealth on the front burner. The provinces and territories have made substantial investments in eHealth programmes, matched by federal money through Infoway. I am guessing the total capital spend over the past five years must be in the \$2-3b range, with a forward commitment of at least that again over the next 4 years. This has resulted in major advances in the development of the electronic health record and the establishment of the ICT infrastructure to support eHealth initiatives.

As impressive as this is, it doesn't come close to the £13b that the UK is investing. While I would love to argue that we are smarter and can do the job for less, I highly doubt that is supportable. We may do it differently, and arguably better, but it will likely not be that much cheaper on a per-capita basis.

So the push now needs to be on finishing the job. Continued investment of capital is needed to complete and sustain these eHealth initiatives. How many government programmes have we seen get launched quite successfully and then left to wither away due to loss of interest? The additional capital finishes the deployment. In addition we need to fund the increase in operating costs to then sustain the infrastructure. The world-wide benchmark seems to be 4% of hospital operating expenses annually. I recognize this is a substantial increase from the less than 2% average in many hospitals and regions today, but evidence shows that 4% is what is needed.

The presence of national leadership and coordination around eHealth standards and applications that leverage and maximize the investments being made by governments and health care organizations is the key.

Infoway has proven to be an effective vehicle for catalyzing the development and deployment of quality eHealth solutions across Canada. It is recognized worldwide as a leader in the development of the EHR.

Continued investment in eHealth will be a critical success factor in the effective delivery of quality health services for an aging population and for the effective reform of the healthcare system. Infoway has proven to be an effective vehicle for catalyzing the development and deployment of quality eHealth solutions across Canada. It is recognized worldwide as a leader in the development of the EHR.

To starve it at this stage would be a shame, if not irresponsible. Whether the political party-du-jour favours a vehicle established by another in a past time cannot be the reason not to continue such a critical investment programme. Frankly, and with apologies to Infoway, the vehicle the federal government uses to sustain nation-wide eHealth investment is not as important as the long-term commitment to finish the job.

Regardless of the vehicle chosen, the presence of national leadership and coordination around eHealth standards and applications that leverage and maximize

the investments being made by governments and health care organizations is the key. This fosters a unified market for health ICT solutions, with a corresponding reduction in development costs and a more rapid deployment of consistent EHR and related eHealth solutions. The result is a healthy industry, capable of investing in and supporting the complex needs of our healthcare system.

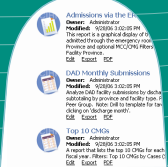
So what are the take-away messages? There are two: Keep up the pressure and visibility on the continued need for investment in eHealth, so we can finish what we have started.

In good times and bad, two industries seem to thrive: liquor and healthcare. Not that I'm adverse to a drink (or two) but I sure hope the statement is valid for healthcare ... mostly for the sake of my parents and children. ●

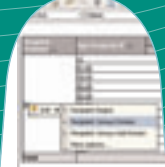
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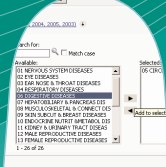
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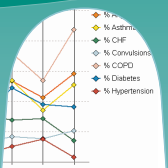
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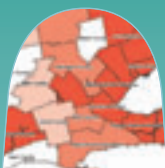
DRILLING Drill into the analytical objects in your reports to uncover more granular data.



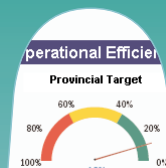
BUILDING Build your own custom reports by selecting from a library of data and analytical objects.



GRAPHS Graph your findings in charts and figures to clearly communicate about the data.




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